Rooted horizon: Charles Tomlinson and American modernism

Two recently-published books by Charles Tomlinson – Some Americans and The Flood* – enhance his already considerable status as a writer. The first, a readable, short yet richly-detailed prose account of the contributions made by some modern American poets and a painter to the growth of his art, is invaluable for several reasons. Not only does the book throw much light on Tomlinson's own debts to the legacy of Ezra Pound and other Americans influenced by il miglior fabbro, it gives readers here fascinating vignettes of major figures in American art of this century. Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Yvor Winters, Marianne Moore, George Oppen, Louis Zukofsky, the painter Georgia O'Keeffe, and Ezra Pound himself – all these heroes and heroines of American modernism are vividly and variously portrayed at first hand. They are shown in spirited struggle against artistic isolation (even in the United States) and philistinism (everywhere), involved in all-too-human misunderstanding, as well as suffering from the ills which come with old age.

Tomlinson's record of encounters with American art and artists shows too how one English poet found that he could make use of their discoveries without any threat to his own identity or, indeed, his Englishness. Confirmation of this comes in the second book, The Flood, Tomlinson's latest volume of poems, which confidently achieves assimilation of some characteristics and qualities of American literary modernism to help shape a distinctively personal yet essentially English voice and vision.

The opening chapter of Some Americans tells how a boy from the North Midlands, going up to Cambridge in 1945 to read English, found gradually that a few poems, stanzas and lines from modern American verse carried haunting messages for him. At that time not much more than anthology scraps of such poetry were available to English readers. Tomlinson's academic studies and early poems were almost entirely 'Eng. Lit.' in character. But lines from Ezra Pound in particular stayed in his mind, like Stephen Dedalus's 'messengers from the secret morning' or, as Tomlinson calls them, 'talismanic fragments'. One quality which drew him to Pound's work was 'a sense of cleanliness in the phrasing'. Nobody else he knew of

could produce such clean writing as, for instance, the opening line of 'A garden': 'Like a skein of loose silk blown against a wall'. Or, from Canto 2:

- Lithe turning of water
- sinews of Poseidon
- Black azure and hyaline
- glass wave over Tyro.

The only American writer he was to read in full at Cambridge was Whitman, but other talismanic fragments included Marianne Moore's delightful poem 'The steeple-jack' and T. E. Hulme's Imagist verses also to be found in Michael Roberts's edition of the Faber Book of Modern Verse. By good fortune his tutor during his final year at Cambridge was Donald Davie. Davie, just beginning himself to delve into American poetry, shared Tomlinson's enthusiasm and introduced him to pieces by William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens.

For several years after he had left Cambridge the American modernist presence was to remain a relatively fragmented, though increasingly formative, part of Tomlinson's experience. Like Davie, he studied the English Augustan poets (finding them a valuable defence against the Romantic excesses of Dylan Thomas's imitators), but he also read Hart Crane and, in greater depth now, Pound and Marianne Moore. In American writing he began to distinguish between two quite different positions. Crane, Whitman, Poe, and Emerson represented in various degrees an other-worldly, even suicidally self-negating approach to existence. In Pound, Moore, Stevens, and Williams, however, Tomlinson recognised a stance closer to his own 'basic theme': 'that one does not need to go beyond sense experience to some mythic union, that the "I" can only be responsible in relationship and not by dissolving itself away into ecstasy or the Oversoul'.

A belief in the individual's world of here and now is at the heart of Tomlinson's essentially moral vision. In the well-known poem 'Against extremity' – published in The Way of a World (1969) – he says: ' . . . extremity hates a given good / Or a good gained'. These lines and others from an earlier poem, 'Aesthetic' – 'Reality is to be sought, not in concrete / But in space made articulate . . . ' – may help us understand both the celebratory and the selective nature of his poetic imagination.

In his poetry of the 1950s (The Necklace and Seeing Is Believing), besides Pound, Stevens, and Moore, there are also the tones of Coleridge's conversation poems and a confident aesthetic consciously derived in part from Coleridge (and Kant?), Ruskin, and T. S. Eliot. From the last-named, Tomlinson tells us, he absorbed the limitations on individualism: 'a
suspicion of the romantic ego and of the notion that poetry can be carried through by the gust of personality and intensity'.

Towards the end of the 1950s Tomlinson had begun to correspond with Marianne Moore. At this time he was experimenting with William Carlos Williams's 'three-ply' poems and he exchanged letters with Williams too. His work – almost disregarded in this country – was increasingly well-received in the United States. Seeing Is Believing came out in New York after many rejections from British publishers. It is little wonder, then, that he found himself estranged from the closed-in attitudes of English Movement poetry, even though the best writers in that critical cage, including Larkin as well as Davie, were always breaking through the bars.

In 1959 Tomlinson visited the USA for the first time. During this and later visits he met Marianne Moore, Yvor Winters, William Carlos Williams, and several younger writers. His descriptions of these meetings are full of simple, affectionate charm and a delighted observation of particulars. His American friends were touched by his genuine admiration for their work and, in turn, they recognised the American-inspired qualities in his poetry. The first chapter of Some Americans ends with the unanswered question why Tomlinson has remained in Britain when (as Wyndham Lewis suggested to him) he might have had much earlier recognition and a larger, more sympathetic, readership in the USA. Perhaps part of the answer is that Tomlinson is even more English than even he recognises.

An interesting anecdote in the first chapter arises from Ruskin's fine description of the proper way to see and to paint a fir-tree. According to Ruskin it is impossible to get detail right until 'ruling form has been secured'. This ruling form is not a mechanical formula; it is the true perception of what is naturally and really there. This anecdote links with the second chapter of his book where Tomlinson describes encounters with the founder-Objectivists, George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky. They are portrayed with deep affection. Tomlinson received craftsmen's and artists' encouragement from them – from Zukofsky in particular. Two short 'statements' from Zukofsky's A6 are quoted to show the two main sides of his (and Objectivist) poetics:

The melody! the rest is accessory:
and

My one voice. My other: is
An objective – rays of the object brought to a focus . . .

The making of poems as precise musical objects is what Tomlinson finds in the Objectivists, both confirming and, through Zukofsky, developing
important (though not quite so central) facets of his own poetic. Lively portrayals of Oppen and Zukofsky conclude with a sympathetic analysis of the painful division which had grown between these former close friends and sensitive, proud writers.

Tomlinson's one meeting in 1963 with the painter Georgia O'Keeffe, described in his third chapter, reminds his readers that Tomlinson is a painter too. His appreciation of Miss O'Keeffe's work and of the desert landscapes of New Mexico in winter are written with a painter's sensitive eye:

Among the ghostly greys of the winter cottonwood trees, behind the tin-roofed abodes, along the banks of the snow-filled Rio Chama, everything rekindled, glittered, sending up mica showers, crossing blades of light. Light that had been snow. Snow that underscored the reefs of orange rock. It was the dance of fire and ice.

This particular encounter is full of slightly absurd misunderstandings too which Tomlinson conveys with self-deprecating good humour. Indeed, what will surprise some of his more mistrustful English critics about this book is just how strong a sense of humour Tomlinson has. His single meeting with the delightful Miss O'Keeffe (who is also Mrs Alfred Stieglitz though she always refused to take on her famous husband's name) gave rise to a genuinely funny and illuminating essay.

'Rays of the object brought to a focus', says Zukofsky. But what if the object is kaleidoscopic experience, fleeting memories? For his portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe Tomlinson used a visual style. In his final chapter - on memories of Italy and Ezra Pound — he creates a study in musical form and many styles. Another talismanic fragment, this time from Pound's Pisan Cantos, begins the piece and gives it a title:

Dove sta memoria
	til the stone eyes look again seaward
	some minds take pleasure in counterpoint

The 'stone eyes' are Pound's own, from the famous sculptured head by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. We follow contrapuntal lines from Gaudier and the Vorticists (and a brief meeting with Robert Lowell) to the Tomlinsons' first comic and exciting visit to Italy, and eventually to encounters with the aged and tired Ezra Pound himself. This glimpse of Pound is the book's talismanic climax. 'Dove sta memoria' is a brilliant piece in which Tomlinson's love of Italy - people, art, landscapes, and architecture - and modern poetry are woven in skilful prose, making one wonder why he has written so little in this genre before this.
All the positive qualities which Tomlinson has admired in his chosen Americans are to be found in the finely-wrought poems of The Flood. A sureness of poetic making combined with alternating joy in the world of the senses and sorrow that, inexorably, this world goes make this Tomlinson’s most persuasive collection. Delighted senses and awareness of hurrying time are woven together in poem after poem. Although the locations change – from the poet’s home terrain in a Gloucestershire valley, to New Mexico and Italy, then back to the Severn estuary and his home – it is time’s passing which runs counter to evocations of place.

The first dozen or so poems move from winter to high summer in a landscape which Tomlinson knows as richly as ever Wordsworth knew his Cumberland. Indeed, Wordsworth and Coleridge are the writers of whom we are continually reminded. Tomlinson’s poetic mode, like theirs, is one of imaginative possession of a terrain which is simultaneously of the mind’s making and convincingly realised. There are several effective short lyrics here, including a truly haunting song (‘Their voices rang’), but three longer poems – ‘Snow signs’, ‘For Miriam’, and ‘The recompense’ – show Tomlinson completely in control of his medium.

‘For Miriam’ is a five-part elegy for an aged woman-preacher whose heretical Christianity spoke so powerfully to the ‘pagan’ Tomlinson that his doubts are shakily expressed:

But whether you will rise again – unless
To enter the earthflesh and its fullness
Is to rise in the unending metamorphosis
Through soil and stem .... This valediction is a requiem.
What was the promise to Abraham and his seed?

In ‘The recompense’ – one of several love poems in The Flood – Tomlinson and his wife climb a dark hill to view a comet which never appears. What they see instead is the moon illuminating themselves and their own world, written in moonlight:

We – recompense for a comet lost –
Could read ourselves into those lines
Pulsating on the eye and to the veins,
Thrust and countercharge to our own racing down,
Lunar flights of the rooted horizon.

‘Snow signs’, alongside ‘The flood’, ‘The epilogue’, and ‘Severnside’ at the end of this volume, is one of the most impressive achievements in contemporary lyric poetry. With a verbal music which Zukofsky would have delighted in, an eye for detail which vies with Marianne Moore’s, the poem varies tone and measure so skilfully that it is difficult to quote from without
giving a false idea of the whole. But its closing lines though unmistakeably Tomlinson's own voice also call to mind the Coleridge of 'Frost at midnight', an English way of speaking and feeling:

Well, if it's for more the snow is waiting
To claim back into disguisal overnight,
As though it were promising a protection
From all it has transfigured, scored and bared,
Now we shall know the force of what resurrection
Outwaits the simplification of the snow.

The 'we', of course, is plural. 'Snow signs' is another of the love poems, and these are the most powerful utterances in the collection. There are good lyrics about experiences in New Mexico and Italy, a marvellously 'clean' narrative ('The Littleton Wale') written in memory of Charles Olson, and a moving short poem for Tomlinson's 'teacher and friend' Donald Davie:

Brother in a mystery you trace
To God, I to an awareness of delight
I cannot name . . .

Yet the longish poems about his home, his family, and an English landscape contain the more complex expressions of Tomlinson's sense of mystery. 'The flood' is perhaps not so complex as 'Snow signs', but it is a superb evocation of home in winter flood and a recreation of the mind's self-making from the (literal) light of experience. It is also an artefact of mature craftsmanship. Tomlinson's dream of another flood in 'The epilogue' gives rise to his most poignant and passionately intimate poem:

I saw the world end: I saw
Myself and you, tenacious and exposed,
Smallest insects on the largest leaf . . .

This dream-flood confirms love's presence and the limitations placed on both love and despair within the general mystery:

We turned and knew now
That no law steadied a sliding world,
For what we saw was an advancing wave
Cresting along the height. An elate
Despair held us together silent there
Waiting for that wall to fall and bury
Us and the love that taught us to forget
To fear it . . .

In Some Americans Charles Tomlinson has argued that English poets can learn from modern American poetics. He has also provided the most convincing introduction to American modernism for readers over here. In
The Flood he has demonstrated this argument tellingly while showing above all that an original and masterly English imagination can transmute all its hard-won materials, from whatever source, into original English poetry.

JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

The looking glass

In front of me is a world
that doesn't seem to care.
Sunlight that's brilliant as ever.
And someone who hasn't heard my name at all.

Here my hands merely open and close.
My face hasn't moved all night.
My fallow feet, awake side by side,
senselessly rub the air with their toes.

I lift my head and look,
but there's no one there.
I'd like to wait and wait
until my head drops back again.

Still I do not know what I want.
I like to be here a long time
but that wouldn't help me to make sense.
I'm not sure I know myself yet.

And I try to stand and bear my pain.
I can hear the beating of my heart
but my body doesn't seem to move.
Only the quick steps of my blood go past me.

And I follow myself around,
piece by piece, everywhere.
The world is always at the end, there.
With sunlight shaking the carcass of last night.